

Debate Pack
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Debate on public access to nature

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Summary

A debate has been scheduled for Thursday 18 May on public access to nature. The subject for the debate has been chosen by the Backbench Business Committee, and the debate will be opened by Caroline Lucas MP.

1 Background

1.1 State of nature in the UK

The Joint Nature Conservation Committee, the Government’s advisory body on nature conservation, publishes annual updates on the state of biodiversity in the UK. The most [UK Biodiversity Indicators](#) was published in December 2022. The report found that:

- 50% of measures assessed showed an improvement over the long term, 36% showed a short term improvement
- 33% of measures assessed showed a decline in the long term, 33% showed a decline in the short term ¹

Most of the indicators showing a decline were in the ‘safeguarding ecosystems, species and genetic diversity’ category and are included in the following table.

Mixed progress on UK biodiversity Indicators for habitats, priority species, animals and expenditure			
	Long term change	Short term change	Latest data
Total extent of protected areas on land	↑	↑	2022
Total extent of protected areas at sea	↑	↑	2022
Condition of A/SSSIs	↑	↓	2022
Relative abundance of priority species	↓	↔	2019
Distribution of priority species	↔	↔	2018
Farmland birds	↓	↓	2019
Woodland birds	↓	↓	2019
Wetland birds	↓	↔	2019
Wintering waterbirds	↑	↔	2018-19
Butterfly populations -widespread species	↔	↔	2021
Butterfly populations -specialist species	↓	↔	2021
Distribution of pollinating insects	↓	↓	2019
Bat populations	↑	↑	2020
Area under agri-environmental schemes	↑	↑	2021
Public expenditure on UK biodiversity	↑	↓	2020/21
Non-govt. spending on UK biodiversity	↑	↓	2020/21

Key: ↓ Deteriorating
↔ Little or no overall change
↑ Improving

¹ JNCC, [UK Biodiversity Indicators 2022](#) (December 2022)

Source: JNCC, [UK Biodiversity Indicators 2022](#) (December 2022)

Short-term progress is normally assessed over five years. Long-term progress is over the longest time period available. In all the indicators in the table above this is for more than ten years.

1.2 Valuing and engaging with nature

Evidence shows that that people value nature, and spending time in nature, including through volunteering with environmental organisations. There is also increased awareness about issues surrounding biodiversity loss in the UK.

Natural England conducted a series of surveys between 2020 and 2022 looking at people's interaction with nature. [Results from the survey](#) showed that urban green spaces were the most visited type of green and natural space, with the April 2020 survey finding 41% of adults visiting these green spaces in the previous month. In the same period, fields, farmland and countryside were visited by 25% of adults; woodland and forests by 24%; and rivers, lakes and canals by 21%.

The survey also asked about attitudes to being in green spaces and found that:

- The large majority of adults (86%) with access to a private garden or allotment felt that green spaces are important to them.
- The large majority of adults (89%) agreed or strongly agreed that green and natural spaces should be good places for mental health and wellbeing.
- The vast majority of adults (87%) agreed that 'being in nature makes me happy'.²

There has also been a general increase in the total number of hours people in England spent volunteering on nature conservation activities. Defra measures this across ten environmental organisations, including the Canal and Rivers Trust, the RSPB, and the Wildlife Trusts. Volunteer hours rose from just under 4 million hours in 2000 to a peak of 5.8 million hours in 2018, before a 5% fall in 2019. There was a 42% increase between 2000 and 2019 and an 11% increase in the five years to 2019.³

² Natural England, [People and Nature Survey: How are we connecting with nature during the coronavirus pandemic?](#) 12 June 2020

³ Defra, ENV09 - [England biodiversity indicators](#) (England Biodiversity Indicators 2021 data set -indicator 14)

The latest data on public awareness, understanding and support for conservation in England is for 2018. This found the following patterns between 2014 and 2018:

- The proportion of people highly engaged with the issue of biodiversity loss⁴ increased from 5% to 10%.
- The proportion showing some engagement⁵ with biodiversity loss increased from 45% to 53%.
- Those not aware of the issue fell from 38% to 28%.⁶

1.1 Health benefits of improved access to nature

There is a growing evidence base indicating that spending time in nature and green spaces (eg parks, woodland, fields and allotments) has a positive impact on both physical and mental health. For example, it has been associated with “lower probabilities of cardiovascular disease, obesity, diabetes, asthma hospitalisation [and] mental distress” among adults.⁷

In March 2020, Public Health England (PHE, now the UK Health Security Agency) published a report on [Improving access to greenspace](#). It emphasised that “improving access to quality greenspace has the potential to improve health outcomes for the whole population” and highlighted the various ways in which greenspace is associated with good health and wellbeing:

- improving access to greenspace promotes healthy behaviours, such as engaging in physical activity and other recreation, and connecting those spaces together can encourage active travel;
- greenspace also can improve social contacts and give people a sense of familiarity and belonging – cleaner, greener communities are places where people wish to live and work: they can promote social contact and connectivity, foster a sense of belonging, reduce isolation and loneliness and encourage a connection to nature;

⁴ A 'highly engaged' person: believes there will be a loss of biodiversity, is concerned and performs a combination of 'day-to-day' actions and 'higher effort' actions.

⁵ 'Some engagement' is defined as: Believes there will be a loss of biodiversity, is concerned, and performs 0 to 2 'day-to-day' actions to support and protect biodiversity.

⁶ Defra, ENV09 - [England biodiversity indicators](#) (England Biodiversity Indicators 2021 data set -indicator 13)

⁷ Mathew P. White et al, [Spending at least 120 minutes a week in nature is associated with good health and wellbeing](#), Scientific Reports volume 9, Article number: 7730 (2019); see also Mental Health Foundation, [Nature. How connecting with nature benefits our mental health](#) (opens PDF), 2021

- greenspace supports the development of skills and capabilities – particularly for young people, there is emerging evidence that spending time in greenspace is associated with a range of benefits including improved motor skills, better academic performance and increased concentration;
- nearby greenspace, and green features such as pocket parks, street trees, green walls and roof gardens, also mediate potential harms posed by the local environment – it can help to reduce exposure to air pollution, reduce the urban heat island effect, and mitigate excessive noise and reduce flood risk, all of which can impair both physical and mental health.⁸

A briefing by the European Environment Agency in February 2023, on [who benefits from nature in cities](#), set out the evidence on the benefits of urban green space for children and the elderly. It concluded:

The health benefits of urban green space are well recognised for children, whose physical and mental development is enhanced by living, playing and learning in green environments. The elderly also benefit significantly from visiting green and blue spaces, through improved physical health and social well-being.⁹

It also highlighted evidence of the impacts of inequality with “less and lower quality green space typically found in communities of lower socio-economic status”.¹⁰

1.3

Right to Roam in England, Wales and Scotland

Access rights

In England and Wales, under provisions introduced through the [Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000](#), there is a right to walk on some land without having to keep to public rights of way (also referred to as a right to roam). This land is known as ‘open access land’ or ‘access land’. Access land includes mountains, moors, heaths and downs that are unimproved, whether publicly or privately owned. It also includes common land registered with the local council and coastal path land. See Government websites for [details in England](#) and [Wales](#)

⁸ Public Health England, [Improving access to greenspace, A new review for 2020](#) (opens PDF), March 2020

⁹ European Environment Agency, [Who benefits from nature in cities? Social inequalities in access to urban green and blue spaces across Europe](#), 7 February 2023

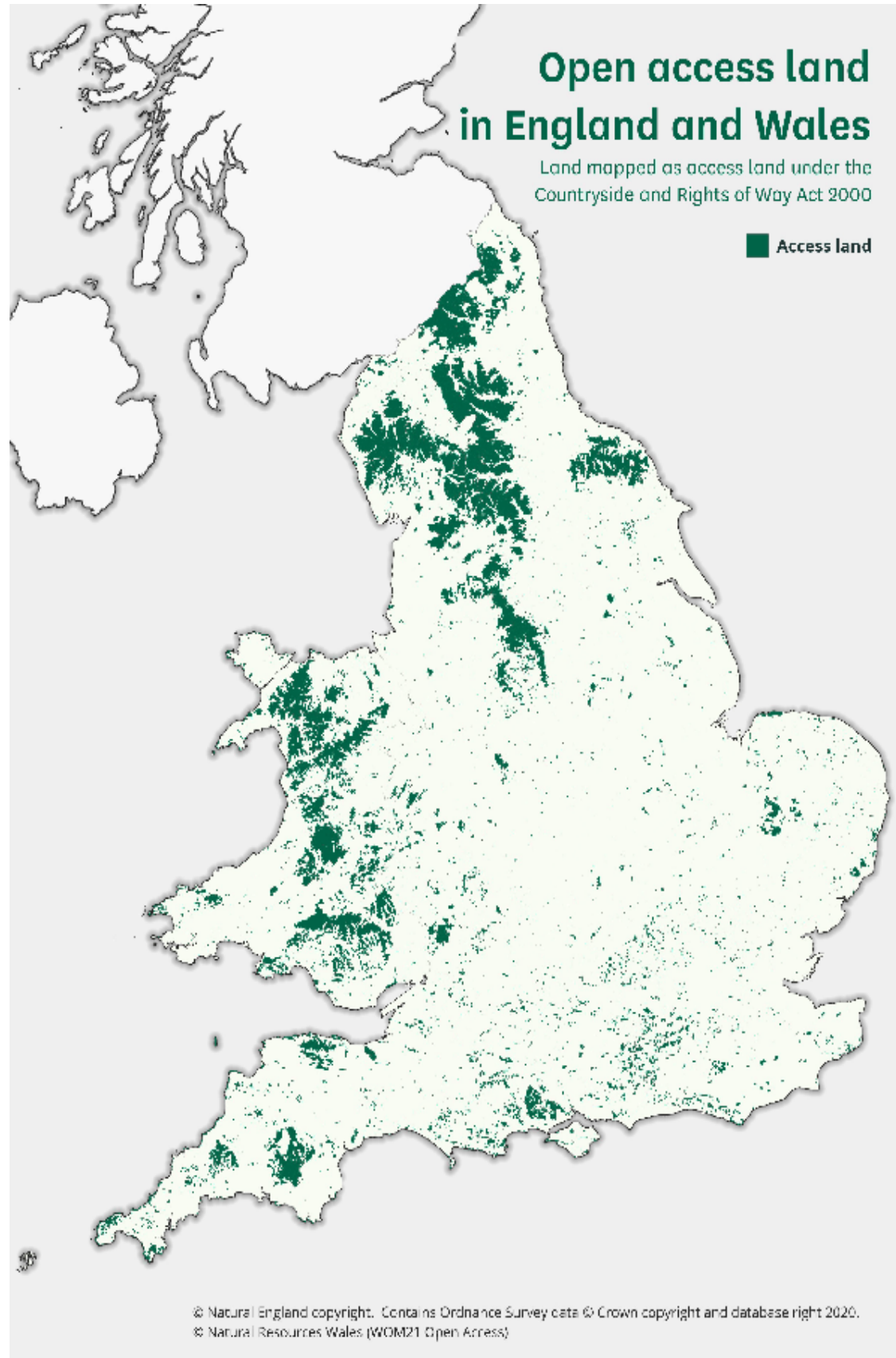
¹⁰ European Environment Agency, [Who benefits from nature in cities? Social inequalities in access to urban green and blue spaces across Europe](#), 7 February 2023

Rights of access in Scotland are more extensive, with most land and inland waterways included. The [Land Reform \(Scotland\) Act 2003](#) sets out a right of responsible non-motorised access to land and inland water throughout Scotland for recreational and other purposes, with a few exceptions.

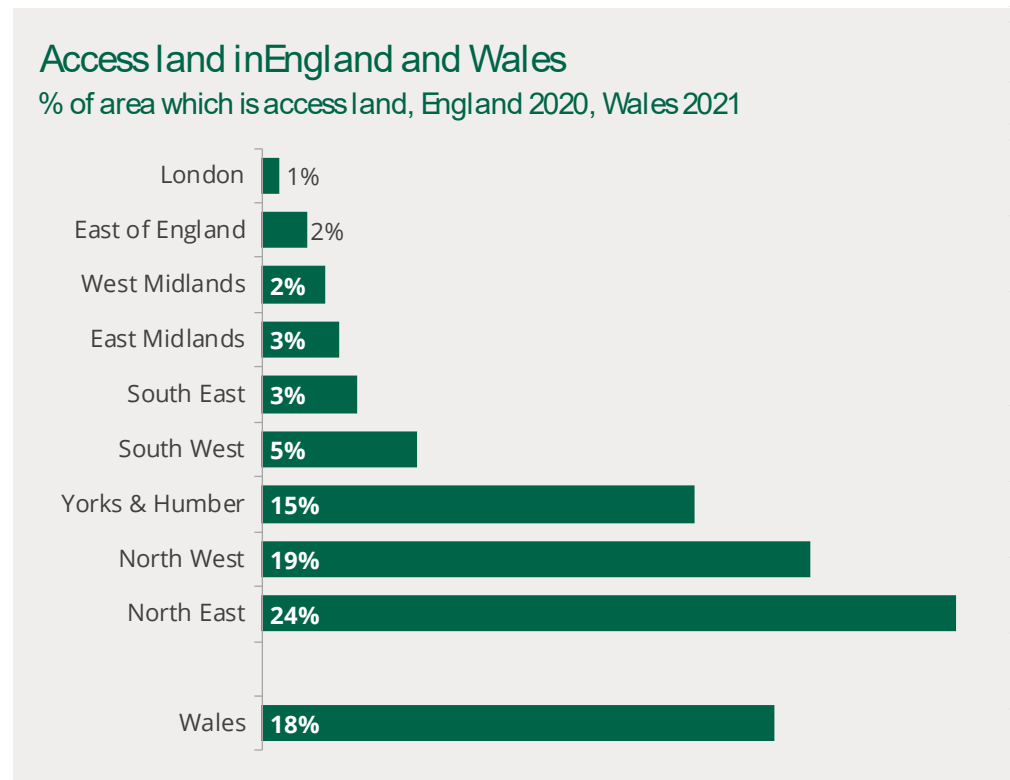
The [Scottish Outdoor Access Code](#) sets out the detail of where access rights apply and what can be done within access rights. It also describes where access rights don't apply, such as fields of crops (although walking along the verges is allowed) and the gardens of houses.

Access land

The map on the following page shows 'open access land' in England and Wales. This includes registered common land and privately owned 'open country' (mountain, moor, heath and down). It excludes certain categories of excepted land. The public has a right of access to this land under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. It does not include the [England Coastal Path Coastal Margin](#).



Just under 8% of England and just under 18% of Wales is access land. The chart below shows that this rate varies considerably within England.



Sources: Natural England, [CRoW Act 2000 - Access Layer](#); Natural Resources Wales/DataMapWales, [WOM21 Open Access](#)

1.4

Government policy on access to nature

The Government's focus on increasing access to nature and green spaces has primarily been on increasing walking routes and setting targets for proximity to nature. It is also looking at ways of increasing permissive access to woodlands. It is reviewing how access land is mapped but is not considering reviewing what land is designated as open access.

25 Year Environment Plan 2018

The [25 Year Environment Plan](#), published by the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in 2018, included the headline aim of "connecting people with the environment to improve health and wellbeing". It committed to:

Making sure that there are high quality, accessible, natural spaces close to where people live and work, particularly in urban areas, and encouraging more people to spend time in them to benefit their health and wellbeing.¹¹

The Government published its first revision of 25 Year Environment Plan, the [Environment Improvement Plan](#), in 2023. This set out its progress to date in this area as follows:

- Opened nearly 400 more miles of [England Coast Path](#) and published our plans for more than 99% of the route.
- Opened around 250 more miles of walking and cycling routes since 2020, including through the [Active Travel Fund](#) and the [National Cycle Network](#) upgrade programme, helping more people to enjoy healthy activity in nature.
- Launched the [Green Social Prescribing](#) programme to prevent and tackle mental ill health.

The Environment Improvement Plan includes a headline goal of “thriving plants and wildlife” and “enhancing beauty, heritage and engagement with the natural environment”. Under the latter, the Plan includes three targets:

- Work across government to fulfill a new and ambitious commitment that everyone should live within 15 minutes’ walk of a green or blue space.
- Make the England Coast Path fully walkable by the end of 2024.
- Deliver a new National Trail along the route of the Coast to Coast path by 2025.¹²

The Plan included a number of commitments relevant to access to nature, including the following:

- Increase the accessibility of green and blue spaces
- Create or significantly refurbish over 100 green spaces through the Levelling Up Parks Fund.
- Identifying key areas for nature restoration through the roll out of Local Nature Recovery Strategies in the Green Belt
- Improving the quantity, quality and permanency of woodland access.
- Scale up green social prescribing¹³

¹¹ Defra, [25 Year Environment Plan](#), January 2018

¹² Defra, [Environment Improvement Plan](#), January 2023

¹³ Defra, [Environment Improvement Plan](#), January 2023

Responding to the publication of the Plan, Wildlife and Countryside Link, a coalition of environmental organisations, [called for legislation to back the proposals](#):

Ensuring easy access to nature would be great news for health and wellbeing, especially for the millions of people living in neighbourhoods deprived of natural space. The Government's positive commitment today should be locked into law, with a clear mission in the Levelling Up Bill to ensure that everyone can benefit from a healthy environment.¹⁴

Glover Review of Landscapes

In 2018 The Government commissioned a [Designated Landscapes Review](#) of National Parks and Areas of Outstanding National Beauty. The Review, led by Julian Glover, reported in September 2019.¹⁵

Chapter 2 of the Review access to natural landscapes and set out a number of proposals for Government. These included:

- A stronger mission to connect all people with our national landscapes, supported and held to account by the new National Landscapes Service
- A night under the stars in a national landscape for every child
- New long-term programmes to increase the ethnic diversity of visitors
- Landscapes that cater for and improve the nation's health and wellbeing
- Expanding volunteering in our national landscapes¹⁶

for the Review also called on the Government to “consider expanding open access rights in national landscapes”.¹⁷

The [Government's response was published in January 2022](#). The Government said that it was “actively developing opportunities to work across government to strengthen the role that protected landscapes can play in supporting the country's health, wellbeing, and education.” It also said that it would work with partners on:

connecting young people with nature, increasing the ethnic and socio-economic diversity of visitors, and aiding people with disabilities to enjoy our protected landscapes.¹⁸

¹⁴ Wildlife and Countryside Link, [“New species funding must be more than a flash in the pan” – Wildlife and Countryside Link reacts to Environment Improvement Plan](#), 31 January 2023

¹⁵ Glover Review, [Landscapes review: final report](#), September 2019

¹⁶ Glover Review, [Landscapes review: final report](#), September 2019

¹⁷ Glover Review, [Landscapes review: final report](#), September 2019

¹⁸ Defra, [Landscapes review \(National Parks and AONBs\): government response](#), January 2022

On the response to expanding access rights see section 1.5 below.

Urban green spaces

The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has set up the [Future Parks Accelerator](#) with the National Trust and the National Heritage Fund. The aim is to support “local authorities to improve quality, sustainability, connectivity and access to urban green space”.

[Public Health England’s review improving access to green space in 2020](#) recommended that local authorities should “consider local green (and blue) space to be critical assets for maintaining and supporting health and wellbeing in local communities”.¹⁹ They should also work on creating greener communities and focus on areas of deprivation or where there is “poor or unequal access”.

In August 2022 the Government launched a £9million [Levelling Up Parks Fund](#) which gives grants to the places the Government have identified as most in need of quality green space. More recently, in January 2023, Natural England published [a Green Infrastructure Framework](#) alongside the Environment Improvement Plan, aimed at supporting local authorities in delivering the pledge for everyone to have a good quality blue or green space within 15 minutes’ walk from home.

1.5 Review of access land in England

There were [reports in the press](#) in 2022 that a review of access to nature, including right to roam, was being carried out as part of the spending review by the Treasury in 2021. The Government confirmed [in response to a written question on 18 July 2022](#), that an Access to Outdoors commission had been set up but that no report was produced:

No formal report was produced by the Access to the Outdoors commission. The outcomes of the commission include £30 million provided through the Spending Review to improve public access to green spaces and better joined up working across government in taking forward a number of policy measures.²⁰

In response to [the Glover review](#) proposing a review rights of access in National Parks, the Government made clear it did not support this. Instead, its response focused on encouraging permissive access (where landowners give permission for access without establishing any long term access rights):

¹⁹ Public Health England, [Improving access to greenspace, A new review for 2020](#) (opens PDF), March 2020

²⁰ Written Answer, [Outdoor Recreation, UIN 34888](#) 18 July 2022

Open access land

Proposal 16 recommends expanding open access rights to provide additional recreational opportunities. We aim to review the open access maps to clarify rights and inform any further consideration of expanding open access rights. We will also continue to pay for heritage, access and engagement through our existing schemes and we will consider how to maintain investment in these areas as part of future schemes. In parallel, we will also explore the barriers that may exist to the provision of permissive access by landowners and seek to remedy these.²¹

The Government's position on increasing the right to roam was set out in a [written response in January 2023](#). The Government made clear there was no plan to make any changes to the definition of access land in England:

The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 provides for a right to roam across open access land [...]. We have no plans to change this. [...]

We do not plan to mandate that new woodlands have public access or introduce a right to roam across all woodlands [...] We will also encourage more access provision through our woodland creation grants. [...]

We recognise that when open access land was originally mapped and new rights over it introduced in 2004-5, not all downland was mapped satisfactorily. We have already announced our intention to carry out a review of those maps, and work has begun to plan for this review. As part of the review, we will aim to improve our mapping of the downland landform, which is likely to mean that more areas of downland are identified and will become subject to access rights.

In March 2023, in response to a question on whether Defra had had discussions with Natural England on options for [expanding the freedom to roam to other land types](#), including woodland and inland waterside, the Government set out its concerns:

While we want to increase access to nature, as per Goal 10 of the Environmental Improvement Plan 2023, we also recognise that to restore nature we need to ensure that people can enjoy its beauty responsibly. We also know it is important to recognise the needs of all those who live and work in the countryside.

A broader right to roam would risk trampling rather than protecting our habitats and species, and could also risk harming the livelihoods of our farmers.²²

²¹ Defra, [Landscapes review \(National Parks and AONBs\): government response](#), 15 January 2022

²² Written Answer, [Land: Access UIN 157627](#), 3 March 2023

1.6

Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (Amendment) Bill

This is a Private Members Bill introduced to the House of Commons by Caroline Lucas, currently scheduled for second reading on 1 December 2023.

The aim the [Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 \(Amendment\) Bill](#) is to “to extend the right of public access to the countryside, including to woodlands, the Green Belt, waters and more grasslands; and for connected purposes” The [reasons for introducing the Bill](#) were set out by Caroline Lucas in an October 2022 Guardian article:

Ninety-seven per cent of rivers are currently off-limits to the public, and tens of thousands of acres of woodland have benefited from public subsidy, yet remain publicly inaccessible.

Though her campaign sounds radical, Lucas says it is not in reality such a big ask. Talking to the Guardian shortly before launching the bill, Lucas said: “I think if the measures in the bill were to go through, instead of having access to only 8% of English land, we’d be coming up to somewhere near around 30%. So it’s a very modest ask.”

She points out that the bill has important ramifications for inequality. The majority of people who cannot access nature nearby are people in low-income areas who don’t have a car, which is necessary to get to most nature reserves. Those areas also tend to have fewer trees and smaller gardens ²³

The Bill would increase the area of land in England designated as access land by removing “semi-improved grassland” from the types of land excluded from the definition of open country, where access is allowed. The current definition includes “mountain, moor, heath or down” only.²⁴ The Bill would add woodlands, Green Belt and riverbanks to the definition.

The Bill would also create a right off access to waterways for non-powered vessels by adding the following to the definition of access land:

Includes any river, stream, lake, pond, canal or other waterway physically capable of navigation, and any such river banks or land adjacent as necessary for the act of navigation and for other purposes incidental to navigation or to bathe

²³ The Guardian, [People are right to trespass in fight for right to roam in England](#), says Green MP, 13 October 2022

²⁴ [Devon County Council](#) website defines semi-improved as grassland that “contains a mixture of fine leaved and coarse grasses and plants such as dandelion, plantain, yarrow and meadow buttercup”.

It includes an amendment to the exclusions set out in Schedule 2 of the CROW Act, to change the exclusion from access to land any person using “a vessel or sailboard on any non-tidal water” to “a powered vessel”. The aim of this is to allow access from land from vessels such as kayaks or canoes.

Finally, the Bill would create a right to camp on access land, provided they comply with codes of conduct issued under section 20 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. It would do this by removing camping from the lists of exclusions in Schedule 2 to the Act.

The Bill has the support of the [Right To Roam campaign](#) which is calling for a Right to Roam Act “so that millions more people can have easy access to open space, and the physical, mental and spiritual health benefits that it brings”.

Tim Bonner, chief executive of the Countryside Alliance, did [not support the expanding the right to roam](#) in an article in August 2022, stating that “unrestrained human access and the conservation of biodiversity just do not mix”. Instead, he referred to England’s existing footpath network which “has the advantage of giving controlled access in specific areas”.²⁵

[The RSPB supports increasing access to land and rivers](#) in England, similar to the provisions in Scotland. In its view a “successful” increase in the right to roam would:

Expand opportunities to connect with nature across the UK, while leaving space for it to thrive. So, restrictions will look different in different spaces. We recognise that as a nation, we urgently need to connect to our special places if we are to help them recover.²⁶

²⁵ Countryside Alliance, [Tim Bonner: Should there be a 'Right to Roam'](#), 18 August 2022

²⁶ RSPB, [Access to nature is powerful – but we must tread carefully](#) [website visited 17 May 2003]

2

PQs

Urban Areas: Environment Protection

Asked by: Esterson, Bill

To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, what discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on supporting the greening of urban areas.

Answering member: Trudy Harrison | Department: Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Our Environmental Improvement Plan sets out our commitment for every household to be within a 15-minute walk of a green space or water – and this commitment reflects the ongoing work across government to deliver better access to nature across all sections of society. Cabinet colleagues' departments helped develop the Green Infrastructure Framework, launched by Natural England in 2023. This will help local planning authorities and developers to create or improve green and blue infrastructure in both urban and rural areas. The Government will support local authorities to improve access to green infrastructure.

HC Deb 15 May 2023 | PQ 184072

Public Footpaths: Rural Areas

Asked by: Baroness Kennedy of Cradley

To ask His Majesty's Government what steps they are taking to support the restoration of footpaths in rural areas of England.

Answering member: Lord Benyon | Department: Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

The Government recognises the importance of providing access to the outdoors for people's health and wellbeing and are working to ensure this is safe and appropriate. We committed in our Environmental Improvement Plan to work across government to help ensure that everyone lives within 15 minutes' walk of a green or blue space.

The Government is delivering a number of policies to increase access to nature including implementing a number of rights of way reforms which will streamline the process for adding new or lost footpaths to the rights of way network. Work is progressing on the England Coast Path, with nearly 800 miles now open to the public, and the designation of Wainwright's coast to coast route across the north of England as a National Trail.

We are delivering the £14.5m 'Access for All' programme, which consists of a package of targeted measures in our protected landscapes, national trails, forests and the wider countryside to make access to green and blue spaces more inclusive. The Farming in Protected Landscape (FiPL) programme includes the provision for permissive access and capital items to support access to the countryside or improvements to access such as gates, stiles and interpretation.

Local highway authorities are responsible for the management and maintenance of existing public rights of way and are required to keep a Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP) to plan improvements to the rights of way network in their area. This must include an assessment of the local rights of way including the condition of the network.

HL Deb 03 May 2023 | PQ HL7444

Countryside: Access

Asked by: Knight, Sir Greg

To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, what steps her Department is taking to (a) improve access to the countryside and (b) ensure that footpath and green lanes are properly maintained.

Answering member: Trudy Harrison | Department: Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

The Government recognises the importance of providing access to the outdoors for people's health and wellbeing and are working to ensure this is safe and appropriate. We committed in our Environmental Improvement Plan published on 31 January to work across government to help ensure that everyone lives within 15 minutes' walk of a green or blue space.

The Government is delivering a number of policies to increase access to nature including:

- Delivering the £14.5m 'Access for All' programme, which consists of a package of targeted measures in our protected landscapes, national trails, forests and the wider countryside to make access to green and blue spaces more inclusive.
- Working to complete the England Coast Path which, at around 2,700 miles, will be the longest waymarked and maintained coast walking route in the world. Over 2,000 miles have now been approved as England Coast Path, with nearly 800 miles already open. It will also create

250,000 hectares of new open access land within the coastal margin.

- Delivering the £9m Levelling Up Parks Fund to improve green space in over 100 disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the UK.
- Designating Wainwright's coast to coast route across the north of England as a National Trail.
- Our commitment to the provision of safe and appropriate public access in as many woodlands as possible as set out in the England Trees Action Plan. The recently published Environmental Improvement Plan reiterates our commitment to publish our ambition for improving the quantity, quality, and permanency of woodland access.
- Through programmes with the Community Forests and Forestry England we are enabling creation of large scale publicly accessible woodlands near towns and cities.
- We continue to support land managers to provide woodland access through our Countryside Stewardship (CS) and England Woodland Creation Offer (EWCO) schemes.
- Under the new Environmental Land Management (ELM) offer, for woodlands, we are providing societal benefits by bringing people closer to nature, allowing long term permissive access for recreation and contributing to the rural economy.

Local authorities are responsible for the management and maintenance of public rights of way including green lanes. Landowners are responsible for the maintenance of permissive paths. The UK Forestry Standard clearly states that existing rights of access must be respected and not obstructed. In England and Wales, responsible access must be allowed on mapped access land, including woodland dedicated under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, unless a Direction is in place to restrict or exclude access. All government supported planting, such as under our England Woodland Creation Offer (EWCO) and Countryside Stewardship Scheme, must comply with these requirements.

HC Deb 30 March 2023 | PQ 174230

Public Access to Nature

Asked by: Caroline Lucas

What steps she is taking to improve public access to nature.

Answered by: The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Trudy Harrison) | Department: Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Connectivity to rural areas is vitally important to us. As I have already set out this morning, we are spending millions on ensuring that rural areas thrive and that people have access to nature.

Caroline Lucas

As the Minister knows, goal 10 of the environmental improvement plan is to enhance engagement with the natural environment. Saving historic footpaths is a vital way of doing that, so it is a bit bizarre, given there is already a backlog of more than 4,000 applications waiting to be processed to save those footpaths, that the Government have reneged on their promise to scrap the deadline in the mapping review, without any plan to address that backlog. Will the Minister rethink that short-sighted decision, so that we do not risk losing 40,000 miles of precious footpaths forever?

Trudy Harrison

Actually, that decision was taken in 2000, and we have extended the date from 2026 to 2031. I remind the hon. Member of the measures that we are taking to improve access to nature with Natural England and the commitment for people to be within 15 minutes of a blue or green area, as well as with the national trails and the designation of the coast to coast as a national trail. The England coastal path is 2,700 miles around England that people can access. In fact, people can access most coastal, common, fell, moorland and heathland areas across the country, but there is a balance between access for the public, the protection of nature and ensuring that the lives of people in rural areas and their livelihoods thrive.

HC Deb 30 March 2023 | Vol 730 cc1134-5

Land: Access

Asked by: Lucas, Caroline

To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, whether her Department has had discussions with Natural England on options for expanding the freedom to roam to other land types, including woodland and inland waterside.

Answering member: Trudy Harrison | Department: Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 provides for a right to roam across open access land, giving the public a right of access to most areas of mountain, moor, heath, down, registered common land and coastal margin. We have no plans to change this. England has an extensive network of footpaths and the public has the 'right to roam' over many areas of wild, open countryside.

While we want to increase access to nature, as per Goal 10 of the Environmental Improvement Plan 2023, we also recognise that to restore nature we need to ensure that people can enjoy its beauty responsibly. We also know it is important to recognise the needs of all those who live and work in the countryside.

A broader right to roam would risk trampling rather than protecting our habitats and species, and could also risk harming the livelihoods of our farmers.

HC Deb 13 March 2023 | PQ 157627

[Camping Sites: National Parks](#)

Asked by: Winter, Beth

To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, what steps her Department is taking to improve public awareness of permissive wild camping rights in National Parks.

Answering member: Trudy Harrison | Department: Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Improving public awareness of permissive wild camping is a matter for each National Park Authority and the respective landowners. The Government is supporting our National Parks to deliver access to nature, including through an additional £4.4 million funding grant for National Park Authorities to support services such as visitor centres, ranger support and efforts to increase access to nature.

HC Deb 10 March 2023 | PQ 157057

[Countryside: Access](#)

Asked by: Sobel, Alex

To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, what plans she has to increase public access to nature in England.

Answering member: Trudy Harrison | Department: Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

The Government recognises the importance of providing access to the outdoors for people's health and wellbeing and are working to ensure this is safe and appropriate. We want to continue to work with landowners and user groups directly to ensure responsible access is granted in the right places to achieve our 25 Year Environment Plan commitment to make it easier for more people, from every background, to enjoy nature.

The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 provides the public a right of access to most areas of mountain, moor, heath, down, registered common land and coastal margin. The Government is delivering a number of policies to increase access to nature including:

- Working to complete the England Coast Path which, at around 2,700 miles, will be the longest waymarked and maintained coast walking route in the world. Over 2,000 miles have now been approved as England Coast Path, with nearly 800 miles already open. It will also create 250,000 hectares of new open access land within the coastal margin.
- Creating a new National Trail across the North of England.
- Carrying out the first review of Open Access Maps since they were created in 2004/05. The review will clarify where rights to access land exist and provide better clarity and consistency on access rights to both landowners and the wider public.
- In the England Trees Action Plan, we committed to the provision of safe and appropriate public access in as many woodlands as possible through a suite of measures from updating Forestry Commission guidance through to plans to encourage improvements to the quality and permanency of existing access. This will include how we might support greater access for all abilities. We will also encourage more access provision through our woodland creation grants. We recently amended the England Woodland Creation Offer to offer a higher incentive for the provision of access to new woodlands, and made more applicants eligible to apply for funding for access.

We are aware that we must balance the needs of all those who live and work in the countryside with those who visit to ensure that public access brings all the benefits we know it can without affecting nature recovery and food production or security.

Access to nature and the countryside is provided for under the Countryside Stewardship Higher and Mid-Tier schemes. Applicants can receive funds to install access capital items, create woodland access where it would benefit people, and provide educational access to school pupils and care farming clients. As we evolve the CS scheme going forward, we expect this to continue. The Farming in Protected

Landscapes programme also funds the creation of opportunities for people to understand landscapes and cultural heritage, including permissive access. Customers of the English Woodland Creation Offer receive higher payments if woodland is near settlements and provide new long-term permissive access for recreation.

We are exploring how we can pay for actions covering permissive access, managing existing access pressures on land and water, and expanding education access offers. We are also exploring, geographically, where we can support actions to create access and engagement opportunities where they will have the most impact.

HC Deb 23 January 2023 | PQ 126793

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News and useful links

Department for Health and Social Care

30 March 2023

[Exploring perceptions of green social prescribing among clinicians and the public](#)

Nature Mental Health

17 February 2023

[Green space accessibility helps buffer declined mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic: evidence from big data in the United Kingdom](#)

Natural England press release

2 February 2023

[Natural England unveils new Green Infrastructure Framework](#)

BBC News Online

31 January 2023

[Everyone to live 15 minutes from green space or water in England under plans](#)

Politics.co.uk

27 January 2023

[U-turn on farm payments to improve public access would be another blow to people's rights to nature](#)

British Mountaineering Council

30 September 2022

[Taking action to protect our access to nature](#)

Countryside Alliance

22 August 2022

[Tim Bonner: Should there be a 'Right to Roam'?](#)

Guardian

23 June 2022

[Britain ranks bottom in Europe for nature connectedness](#)

Office for National Statistics

27 May 2022

[Health benefits from recreation, natural capital, UK: 2022](#)

Guardian

20 April 2022

[Fears over right to roam in England as ministers wind up review](#)

Guardian

21 February 2022

[UK wildlife campaigners call for legal right to access nature for all](#)

RSPB

[Access to nature is powerful – but we must tread carefully](#)

Gov.uk

[Rights of way and accessing land](#)

Debate on public access to nature

Ramblers

[Access to nature - how well is the government doing?](#)

Right to Roam campaign

[RightToRoam.org.uk](#)

Natural England

[People and access](#)

NHS England

[Green social prescribing](#)

Ordnance Survey

[Greenspace layer in OS Maps](#)

[Open Spaces Society](#)

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